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Memoirs and Letters of James Kent, LL.D., Late Chancellor of the State of New York. By his great-grandson, WILLIAM KENT. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co. 1898. Pp. x, 341.)

A GOOD test of a biography is the impression which its perusal makes on a reader who is in or who puts himself into the attitude of ignorance with reference to its subject. One to whom Chancellor Kent's name was previously unknown, from these *Memoirs and Letters* may derive a very just opinion of the personality, studies, character, labors and standing of that distinguished jurist. As the work, apart from the appendix and index, consists of only 277 pages, it is obvious that the story of a life of eighty-four years is told concisely and without waste of detail, and yet it does not lack color or strength of lines.

The son of a clergyman, born in Dutchess County, N. Y., July 31, 1763, James Kent was graduated from Yale College in 1781, with the love of his classmates and the honors of scholarship, won in a course broken by the incidents of the War of the Revolution.

While in college the reading of Blackstone's *Commentaries* created in him the purpose to become a lawyer, and entering at once upon his studies for the profession, he began that course of systematic research into the standard law books, and liberal excursions, first in English, next into classic and especially into Latin literature, and then into French, to which he adhered through life. The number of the volumes, the variety of subjects, the diversity of the literature subjected, not simply to review, but to earnest study, expose the breadth of intellect, and the thoroughness of preparation which were to flower out into a masterly grasp of high themes and a diction of rare clearness, precision and force.

The methods of the future chancellor explain how in seven years, from the age of twenty-four to thirty-one, he was to accomplish so much. "In the morning till after eight," he says, "I read Latin, then Greek until ten. Then I gave myself up to law or business until the afternoon, and after two hours' attention to French, I concluded the rest of the day with some English author." From these methods came "pleasure and ardor," and "they opened to him a world of learning, of happiness and of fame."

This was the equipment of James Kent, a country lawyer, at Poughkeepsie, N. Y., when in 1793 he removed to New York city and the next year became a professor of law in Columbia College. He was poor, with little practice, and his lectures in the college, after the first course, failed to command attention, so that he soon resigned the professorship.

He had been in 1790 elected a member of Assembly from Dutchess County, and in 1793 he had been defeated in a canvass for representative in Congress by his brother-in-law, Theodorus Bailey. In 1796 he was returned to the Assembly from New York city. While his legislative career was respectable, he felt no zeal in it and no desire to prolong it.

On the contrary when Governor John Jay, who had in February, 1796, appointed him master in chancery, added a year later the appoint-

ment as recorder of the city of New York, he found employment entirely congenial to him, and in 1798 he became, to the satisfaction of his ambition, a judge of the Supreme Court of the state. In that position for sixteen years he achieved the highest reputation, by opinions carefully elaborated and written out in detail, then a novelty in that court, and in 1814 he was commissioned chancellor, when he at once applied his processes of thorough investigation and exhaustive discussion which raised the Court of Chancery to a plane which it had never before occupied.

The habits of wide and liberal study were not abandoned amid the cares and burdens of the supreme bench. In addition to the latest works on jurisprudence Judge Kent kept up the reading of Latin, French and English authors in many fields of literature, including history, philosophy, travels, biography and reviews. His selections were cosmopolitan, but if an opinion may be formed from his summary of the plays of Shakespeare, his critical acumen in the drama was not equal to his legal erudition.

The chancellor during his whole life was a Federalist, a champion of Washington, a particular friend of Hamilton, always opposed to Burr, a severe critic of John Adams, and still more, of course, of Jefferson. He was a familiar figure in the most select social circles of Albany and New York, and his acquaintance and correspondence extended to many eminent persons, notably Story, Webster and Everett.

Fortunate was the provision which made his retirement from the chancellorship compulsory at the age of sixty; for he was thus enabled to return to his office of professor in Columbia College, and to produce the lectures which became the basis of his *Commentaries on American Law*. These gave him a place in the front rank of American jurists, and served, when they first appeared, to introduce our lawyers and courts and decisions and legal learning to the favorable consideration of the old world. Expanded and annotated by the author, and after his death still sensibly edited, these *Commentaries* retain an esteemed place in law libraries at home and abroad.

The "Memories of Alexander Hamilton," printed as an appendix, serve to show the style and the politics of the chancellor.

While the career and labors of Chancellor Kent were not of the popular sort, these *Memoirs* illustrate how thoroughly he used all his talents, and they provide an example and an incentive, not only for professional men but for all, to make the most of time and to garner steadily at every moment the flower and the grain of literature. The book is thus healthy and inspiring, as it is well constructed, and without pretensions or fulsomeness; it is excellent in a high class of biography. Yet, singularly, the date of the death of the chancellor nowhere appears in its pages, an omission sure to be corrected in later editions.

ELLIS H. ROBERTS.